

Public Reason of Interpretation

Hongyan Liang*

Associate Professor
English Department, Dongguan City University, Dongguan, China

Abstract: Interpretative activity is a rational cognition of man on objective existence, and when this kind of reason blends with publicness in social field and integrates into public reason of man, in essence, it is the rational cognition of man as subject on materialistic world in life; in practice, it is the spontaneous consciousness of man on the significance, anxiety and construction of his own being. Only in public rational field can the meaning of text be judged correctly and understood, and the interpretation obtain the identity of legitimacy. In the interpretive behavior of human beings, the aims of public reasons are as follows: first, to satisfy the rational cognitive requirement of interpretive subject and make its achievements shared by rational beings;; secondly, to promote the interpretation of object to reach the certainty of meaning and restrict people to interpret metaphysically according to principle of freedom. Due to the general misinterpretation of the practice in interpretive activity, public reason of interpretation adopts value and meaning as a pattern. In the stage of recognizing regulation so as to acquire fact, it is a mixture of cognition, understanding and proving with heterogeneous, coinciding and contradictory textual meaning, which results in the foundation for the rational cognition of the truth. In the stage of ascertain knowledge, it opposes nihilistic interpretation and constructs an interpersonal interpretative and understanding relationship with its public nature to know the commonality of text so as to form the common understanding of the common nature of text

1 Introduction

Interpretative activity is a rational cognition of man on objective existence, when a text reaches the public sphere, it means it enters the public eye and will accept all kinds of reviews and disputes from interpretative subjects, and then the implied meaning in the text will be discovered. Hannah Arendt notes: "Obviously, the character of the public realm must change in accordance with the activities admitted into it, but to a large extent the activity itself changes its own nature too."¹. Arendt does not devise the concept of the public realm with any common measurement or denominator can ever be devised, but "everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity."². But, in the whole public sphere, Is interpretation a free behavior of rational cognition? And does it have standards to follow? In this context, when a text as an external form of verbal sign get into the discourse space of public sphere, it seemingly evolve into the community of meaning with publicity, But is that really the case? After carefully looking back upon the general hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, ontological hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer and Lico's textual hermeneutics,

it is amazingly discovered that the text reviewed by all kinds of interpretative subjects not only can not automatically generate the community of meaning and but also bring about the deviation, attenuation and variation of textual meaning due to the lacking of public reason. So, this article will discuss the following three questions: what is the public reason of textual interpretation? What goals does the public reason realize during the process of textual interpretation? and What paradigmatic effect does it have in interpretative behavior?

2 The Definition for Public Reason

In the *Theses on Public Hermeneutics* by professor Zhang Jiang, he proposes that "Interpretation is a public behavior"³. Interpretation as public behavior is a rational behavior of man, professor Zhang Jiang's view endow interpretative behavior of man with a basic attribute — public reason. So, a question will be come up with, what is public reason of interpretation? although "Definitions is of no value to science because they are always inadequate. The only true definition is the development of the thing itself, and that is no longer a definition."⁴, a definition for public reason of interpretation must be given. Otherwise,

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p.30,

² Ibid., p.32.

³ Zhang Jiang, "Theses on Public Hermeneutics".

⁴ *The complete works of Marx and Engels*, volume 20, p. 667.

* Corresponding author: 824133751@qq.com

the foundation for discussing problems is lost, this article does not have the domain of discussion.

2.1 The publicness of reason

Judging from the history of western thought theory, this theory, publicness of man, originates from the public domain of politics. In the ancient Greek society, the foundation of city-state can be established due to disintegration of family relations. So, outside the family organized naturally, the community organization like city-state arises. Aristotle, the philosophy pioneer in ancient Greece, points out that man is by nature political animals. He means that family domain is the one of private life, it cannot be mixed with the realm of public life in city-state. Aristotle repeatedly stresses that private life is not the manifestation of human reason, human reason is determined by public life, only the reason from different individuals is put into public realm and then criticized and discussed, can the public reason be formed and accepted by society.

Furthermore, some scholar nowadays holds that “reason is the product of human civilization”⁵, this kind of idea stems from the rise of modern contract politics. Contrasted with ancient public sphere, modern public sphere is constructed by such contractarian as Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau. Whether *Leviathan* by Hobbes, *Concerning Civil Government* by Locke or *Social Contract Theory* by Rousseau, all of them talk about natural state, social state and political society over and over again, which means that people in that period attach importance to the reason---the internal relation between society and political society. Rousseau deems that man evolves from the natural state into the social state, and then from social state into the state of political society; the reason of man will be lured by different interests from social sphere and move towards corruption, only in the political society formed by contracts can the reason of man acquire the normative restraint and regain the publicness.

In short, reason is human nature, when it mingles with the publicness in social sphere and congeals into public reason, the reason gains new qualitative description, it is in essence the rational cognition of man as subject on materialistic world in life; in practice, it is the spontaneous consciousness of man on the meaning, worry, care, longing, construction and pursuit of his own being.

2.2 The reason of public sphere

Public reason can be regarded as the rationality of man in public sphere, the reason in public sphere and the one in private life, they are different in meaning, objective, and theory. In a general sense, public reason refers to the rational wisdom and intuitive knowledge that gradually forms in the practical life. It is “a kind of spiritual strength that man has for adjusting and controlling human desire

and behavior”⁶. The wisdom, intuitive knowledge and objective of spiritual strength is man’s value and the significance of human existence, the completeness of man’s performance, confirmation and admiration for himself in reality, it is ““in a holistic way, that is to say, as a whole human being, to occupy the full essence of oneself”⁷.

Since the beginning of western enlightenment philosophy, reason is the basic core concept. but this kind of reason mainly refers to the individual rationality represented by Kant, because reason still does not possess public significance for Kant. After Kant, Hegel, the great philosopher of German classical philosophy, takes reason as “absolute spirit”, he claims that “Reason is the soul of the world and lives in the world, reason constitutes the world’s internal, existing, profound essence, or reason is the universal of the world”⁸. Moreover, he believes that reason constitutes the nature and law of the universe, so whether nature, society or text are the product of reason self-realization. In other word, Hegel changes reason from individual to wholeness---the public reason in a sense. Hegel deems the reason in a whole sense as the standard of objects existence in reality, so a famous quotation comes into being “Everything that is rational is real; Everything that is realistic is rational”⁹. This view becomes the logical starting point of the theory development of different schools of hermeneutics in modern times. When looking back at Hegel’s epistemic Logic of reason, we will have more understanding of hermeneutics in a general sense. It is human being’s deepening cognition of reason that facilitates the hermeneutic behavior to form “An integrated multi-party community”¹⁰.

Furthermore, human interpretative action includes two elements: one is interpreter, another one is interpretative object---text. The human reason with public nature dictates that human interpretative action must be done in a public sphere rather than a private sphere, especially cannot be confined by a large quantity of endless and offbeat perspectives. In our daily life, interpretation and understanding is a very happy thing, people merrily communicate and lightly read, everything is spontaneously on. But, when the authentic meaning of a text is needed to grasp strictly in public sphere and the understanding is caught in conflict and chaos as well, the meaning of text and method of comprehending will naturally become the object that people ask in reply. Therefore, the public interpretation featured by the unity and identity of text become the proper meaning of human public rationality.

In literary field, the public field of literature begins in café, various kinds of meetings, and family discussion of the upper class, it occasionally emerges in the form of literature salon without distinct political demand. But it quickly develops into a cultural form confronting with the state machine. According to Habermas’s conception of the

⁵ Yang Guorong, *Reason and Value*, p 52.

⁶ Wu Zengji et al., *The Call of Rational Spirit*, p. 1.

⁷ *The complete works of Marx and Engels*, volume 42, p. 123.

⁸ G.W.F. Hegel. *Small Logic*, p. 83.

⁹ G.W.F. Hegel. *Small Logic*, p. 45.

¹⁰ Zhang Jiang, “Theses on Public Hermeneutics”.

public domain of literature, this is a discourse space in which the dominant discourse creates the mechanism of excluding "others" -- non-mainstream subcultural concepts always hope to obtain the right of free speech and even dominance through struggle, while the dominant discourse always tries to "exclude" the dissenters¹¹. Some scholar has commented that "the publicity is interventional, intrusive, critical and has obvious political appeal, and arouses the public's wide resonance and sense of participation"¹². But for a piece of literary work, the public meaning of a literary text is produced by the interaction of various interpretations and achieving dynamic balance, so, before a text enters the public sphere, the public meaning just can be hid in the literary text, we need to use the normalization of public reason to interpret it reasonably. Namely, when interpretation is taken as a public behavior, only after the objective cognition of public reason is formed can the public comprehension of a text be achieved.

Hence, it can be generally believed that the public reason of interpretation is public cognitive rationality evolving from individual rationality in human society, it is a compromise of cognitive outcomes achieved by people's cognitive activities in the public domain, and it also is an unbridgeable boundary of people's interpretative action. Only in field of public reason, can the text meaning be judged and understood accurately, and can the legitimacy of interpretation be recognized, which can "meet the need of human mutual understanding and communication"¹³. If the boundary is overstepped, human interpretative action will be the soliloquy in the activity of individual cognition, and the interpretative action does not have the truth brilliance of public reason.

3 The Objectives of Public Reason

After the concept of public reason is discussed, some basic consensuses can be reached: It is a compromise of rational cognition and lay down basic principles and boundaries for human interpretative action. Here another topic arises spontaneously, If human interpretation has the universal meaning of rational cognition in the public domain, the objectives of public reason have to be explored in human interpretative action. Because "The original purpose of reason is to search for and grasp the certainty in the uncertainty"¹⁴. Only when the purpose is clear, can reason play its corroborative role and interpretation have public significance generally accepted by people. So, what objectives does public reason accomplish in human interpretative action?

3.1 Public reason should meet the need of rational cognition of interpretative subjects.

Public reason is a unique rationality of human beings and has its own inherent regularity. Seen from the essence,

man is a rational creature, rationality is the essential attribute universally owned by human individuals. When human consciousness has a boundary between the public sphere and the private sphere, the rationality of the individual is gradually expanded and then transformed into a public reason that needs to be obeyed by people in the process of integration and evolution. Judging from another perspective, In the evolutionary history of human interpretation, before Schleiermacher raises interpretation in the first time, firstly, he systemically researches interpretation, this is a Kantian objective (Reason is the critique of reason, namely critique of pure reason). That is to say, Schleiermacher begins to transcend these previous interpretative individuals that only concerned with specific text applications and scattered annotation techniques, He elevated human interpretation to a general sense of epistemological level, which means the public reason of humanity begins to move from the edge to the center in the process of the development of hermeneutic theory.

Based on such research tradition, Dilthey proposes a more profound view that existence is the text of interpretation. it means that interpretation is no longer the concrete concept of life, humanity and history but the basic category of cognition under rational vision. To some extent, Human public reason is not an abstract theory that transcends human individuals but is commonly found in in the minds of mature and normal human beings. In the interpretative behavior of human beings, Text is composed of meaningful plots and sentences, so text as a whole makes sense, when human public reason interprets the potential meanings of these texts, it represents a kind of basic mind activity of human society.

Generally speaking, the subject of interpretative behavior is man, reason is the basic attribute of man. As human nature, though reason has the particularity that individuals own, it must have something in common. Publicness is the general characteristic that human reason has; the Commonness is not only reflected in the universality of rationality but also in the commonality of rationality. Whether the universality or commonality, both show the public characteristics of human reason. This kind of publicness contains the truth of human cognition behavior, namely, interpretation must conform to the objective laws of existence. In other word, "this kind of publicness shows the universality and commonality of rationality, or the rational outcome is shared by all rational human beings, which means the public use of reason"¹⁵.

3.2 Public reason should promote the interpretative object to achieve the determinacy of meaning

Public reason is purposive, it aims at the purposiveness of interpretative behavior. Looking back to the developing history of hermeneutics, "from the intentional fallacy of

¹¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 24.

¹² Zhao Yong, "The Transformation of Literary Activities and the Disappearance of Literary Publicness".

¹³ Zhang Jiang, "Theses on Public Hermeneutics".

¹⁴ Zhang Jiang, "Theses on Public Hermeneutics".

¹⁵ Gong Qun, "The Publicness of Reason and Public Reason".

New criticism, *Death of the Author* by Roland Barthes to *what is the author* by Foucault, it can be discovered that alienating and denying the author, isolating and blocking the relationship between the author and the text, and taking text as a pure, suspended word and object become the mainstream view and basic claims¹⁶. This interpretative path eliminates the basis of the human cognitive world---the public reason, and always makes interpretative subject understand a text according to its own subjective perception and ignore the subjective meaning of the text, finally shifts or mutates the certainty of interpretation. In interpretative behavior of human beings, owing to the object difference of rational cognition and interpretation, and the different thinking ability and thinking mode of the interpretative subject, the indeterminacy of meaning of the interpretative object is very prominent. Therefore, grasping the indeterminacy of the interpretative meaning not only displays the external requirement of the subject but also shows the intrinsic characteristics of the object; It requires that Interpretive behavior has the universal meaning that can follow and inherit in logic, as well as the interpretation results have the universality of human rational cognition.

But, how does the certainty of interpretation realize in interpretative behavior? as people know, human interpretation is a behavior of rational cognition, Kant hold that the rational cognition behavior can be viewed as cognitive reason or practical reason. To be specific, cognitive reason plays an instrumental role in the practical activity of the interpretative subject, while practical reason plays a normative or guiding role. They mean that people take cognitive categories and various disciplines or experiential knowledge as tools to understand the meaning of the text, then explaining the world or changing the world. In addition, according to Kant's laws of nature and laws of freedom, In the case of natural law, it is a law of causation; in terms of laws of freedom, it satisfies the legislative principle for self. The objects interpreted by human beings are primarily those who have natural causality, the complex relationships between these objects have different particularities. The interpretation for these particularities can not be done according to laws of freedom. The public reason of interpretation is to limit people's metaphysical interpretation Metaphysical interpretation and let human reason in the public domain hold dominant position in the interpretation behavior, then promoting the interpretative object to accomplish the determinacy of meaning.

4 The Public Reason Paradigm of Interpretation

In interpretative behavior, public reason needs to meet the rational cognition requirement of interpretative subjects and accomplish the determinacy of interpretative meaning. After discussing the question, the following questions inevitably need to be probed: how should the public reason of interpretation play its role? Does it have certain operational paradigms? Due to differences in history,

space or culture, the interpretive subject cannot be in the same context, time and space with the text author, the context and distance of space and time between readers and authors often result in misinterpretation of interpretation. for instance, people do have a better understanding of what Plato or other philosophers would have wanted to say but unclearly stated about objects, categories, or laws, as Kant once said he could understand better Plato than Plato himself. However, what Kant says about understanding is already a philosophical creation or criticism, not an interpretation of Platonism. This example illustrates a truth: the public reason of interpretation must follow certain operational paradigm in order to promote the readers to re-create or re-experience the historical context and social environment of the text. Moreover, because "the operational paradigm of public reason is given by the basic cognitive norms of human beings" (17). The basic cognitive norm of human beings is a multidimensional concept, it's hard to discuss it in details. So, for understanding the public rational paradigm of interpretation, the different stages in the process of human cognition firstly need to be considered and explored. Specifically speaking, the operational process of public reason can be divided into two cognitive stages: the stage of cognitive norms of acquiring facts and the stage of cognitive norms of confirming knowledge.

4.1 At the stage of cognitive norms of acquiring facts, people's interpretation for text are mainly about the logical analysis of vocabularies and grammars. People rely on them to answer such questions: what kind of text can be accepted as a fact? what cannot be? We have a variety of ways to get facts, and what is more appropriate? Interpretive behaviors follow the cognitive norms that people should abide by rather than the norms people comply with. That's why interpretation has normative significance. In real life situations, Although the cognitive norms that should be observed in the interpretation of the text are not necessarily followed by specific persons, it can still be done by others. Therefore, there is a difference between the cognitive norms that should be observed and the cognitive norms that people observe, but it is not so obvious. As a matter of fact, the research field of hermeneutists is generally restricted to the cognitive norms that people observe, and then look for facts for them.

4.2 At the stage of cognitive norms of confirming knowledge, such numerous accepted interpretations as author-centered, context reconstruction and empathic understanding, will commonly play a role in human interpretative behavior. Analyzing from the internal operating logic of the interpretative behavior, some people will admit the uncertainty of text meaning, some will stick to the validity of text meaning. "Anyway, it must be admitted that the concept of a text constitutes a central concept only in the linguistic structure of the explanatory concept..... And only from the point of view of interpretation does it come to be understood as a real

¹⁶ Zhang Jiang, "The Death of the Author, or Not".

given”(18)。 according to this concept, the text, as a real given object in the interpretative behavior, means that it is an objective existence, so, it is not necessarily irrational, arbitrary, or subjective interpretation to insist on the indeterminacy of text meaning, it does not mean that interpretation has no norms to follow. Because of the objective existence of interpreters and texts, the meaning of text is also an objective existence. In a general sense, text is both a part of history and a product of human rational knowledge, hence, the understanding of text meaning has the double regulation and restriction of history and reason, guaranteeing the validity of the interpretive behavior.

5. Conclusion

For an individual, reason always belongs to someone's, it is inherent in the personal spiritual world. Anyone's inner world is a private world. The private world reveals to the world some or most of them through his actions and words. But the question is that His ken is private and always interprets activities from private standpoint or personal feelings and motives. But the private standpoint must be understood by others, or what he says, thinks and does cannot be comprehended by other, others don't know how to communicate with him. In other words, the public rational paradigm of interpretation is something in the other spirits that is common to oneself, which can construct an interpersonal relationship of understanding. Starting from the fact that intersubjectivity coexists, the subject of interpretation must convert from the private world to an intersubjective subject world, and then achieve a kind of intersubjective commonness and coexistence from the subjective will and objectivity. Only in this way can the public reason have the meaning and value of the paradigm, it finds the commonness of the text with its own publicity to reach an understanding and consensus on the publicity of the text.

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